Rapid Research Report: Representation of Disability in Employer's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Initiatives

Written by Erin Moser[1]

Edited by Jill L. Bezyak[2]

Submitted

Background Information

This report summarizes how disability is represented in employers' diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives within throughout the United States.

The diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiative in the United States is not new, with its roots beginning in the 1960s during the civil rights movement. Over time, DEI has expanded to include gender, sexual orientation, religion, country of origin, abilities, and other identities. Since the early 2010s, DEI initiatives have become increasingly focused on accountability to ensure diverse groups are represented at all economic and social levels. They are designed to address discrimination, biases, differences of opinion, and marginalization issues to create a culture of respect and inclusion for everyone in the workplace, despite their differences and varying backgrounds[3]. DEI initiatives have significant overlap with Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, as employers use these tools to prevent discrimination in the hiring process.

More recently, the Biden administration further expanded DEI initiatives to include an additional concept – accessibility. In 2021, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defined its role in DEI (now referred to as DEIA by the federal government) initiatives, stating: "Moving forward, OPM will play a critical leadership role in the Administration's governmentwide efforts to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility and we encourage all agencies to continue DEIA activities which include training and educating your workforce"[4]. Although accessibility has typically referred to Section 508 compliance, the administration plans to take a broader stance by identifying who in society has access to and benefits from Federal programs, more specifically focusing on providing a broader range of services to communities and populations that have been underserved.

---

[1] Erin N. Moser, PhD, Associate Professor, University of Northern Colorado.
[2] Jill L. Bezyak, PhD, Professor and PI of the Rocky Mountain ADA Center, University of Northern Colorado.
[3] Edmunds, M. & Lind, D. (2021). *Glossary of Definitions and Core Concepts for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)*. Advisory group on DEI in health services research.
[4] https://feltg.com/what-is-diversity-equity-inclusion-accessibility-deia/

Although the Biden administration's plan is to expand DEI to include accessibility, many corporations have been doing so for decades without formally adopting the term DEIA. For the sake of this report, the acronyms DEI/DEIA will be utilized throughout, unless one is used specifically by an organization. Accessibility is certainly a key piece of the discussion, but the new language has not been fully adopted by many entities outside of the federal government. DEI/DEIA's focus is to create a more fair and just society that includes individuals and groups with varying backgrounds, while respecting the differences inherent in diverse backgrounds. DEI/DEIA initiatives strive to make workplace environments more inclusive and equitable, eliminating discrimination and biases. From an organizational standpoint, the focus of DEI/DEIA and committing to diversity and equity should be a core value with these values leading to better decision-making, increased innovation, and improved employee engagement and retention, and these initiatives serve as organization-wide tools to prevent discrimination in the workplace with specific attention to individuals with disabilities[5].

According to a recent report by Mercer, 81% of organizations report that they are focused on improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility; however, only 42% report having a documented DEI strategy and only 50% have claimed to have established formal DEI goals and targets[6]. Additionally, Officevibe's Pulse Survey data shows that 15% of employees do not feel that an individual's personal identity is respected by everyone in the organization[7]. This exemplifies the importance of creating an office environment that embraces diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and ideas.

Research Question

With many employers increasing diversity, equity inclusion, and accessibility initiatives as a means of preventing discrimination, to what extent is disability being represented?

Common DEI/DEIA Initiatives

There are many different types of DEI/DEIA initiatives that companies can implement to provide an increased understanding and awareness of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to their employees, in an effort to prevent employment discrimination. Some common examples entail inclusion and diversity training, which teach employees about unconscious bias, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination that many people are not aware of. Additionally, employee resource groups, where employees come together to support each other and to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace, have become more popular in recent years. Recruitment and hiring practices are another major focus including

---

[5] https://www.qooper.io/blog/dei-initiative-examples#:~:text=DEI%20initiatives%20are%20designed%20to,hiring%20practices%20and%20policy%20changes
[6] https://factorialhr.com/blog/dei-initiatives/
[7] https://officevibe.com/blog/diversity-and-inclusion-activities

the creation of inclusive job descriptions and advertising and/or actively hiring from underrepresented groups. Creating an environment where employees feel respected, valued, and comfortable providing feedback and sharing their thoughts and experiences strongly supports employee engagement and retention initiatives. And lastly, holding leadership accountable because DEI/DEIA initiatives are more effective when led and supported by top management and can be achieved by setting clear expectations, providing updates and progress reports, and creating DEI/DEIA specific leadership development programs[4]. Although not an exhaustive list, these are common initiatives many companies invest time and effort into in order to create an inclusive environment in the workplace.

DEI/DEIA Disability Representation

DEI/DEIA representation in the workplace continues to expand, with many companies purposefully identifying and including diversity in their workforce in order to eliminate discrimination towards underserved communities, including people with disabilities. Large corporations, such as the ones discussed below, are creating policies and providing resources to their employees to support inclusion of all individuals, regardless of gender, race, religion, or any other identity that makes employees unique. Although not an exhaustive list, the companies identified in more detail below are some of the leading organizations in the DEI/DEIA initiative movement in the United States. These corporations were singled out based on an online search of companies that specifically focus on DEI/DEIA initiatives and support of their employees.

In today's employment landscape, companies are increasingly demonstrating their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. In doing so, DEI/DEIA company initiatives have become easier to identify when researching companies for employment or customer use. Additionally, there are many resources online that not only identify specific companies that are at the forefront of DEI/DEIA initiatives, but resources for companies themselves to continually improve DEI/DEIA initiatives in the workplace. According to 101 Mobility, an online resource that identifies experts in mobility and accessibility solutions, companies such as IBM Corporation, Proctor & Gamble, Ernst & Young, Cisco Systems, S.C. Johnson, and Sodexo are rated as some of the top companies that hire individuals with disabilities[8].

IBM Corporation, for example, heavily emphasizes recruitment/hiring/retainment efforts of workers with disabilities. Their company strongly opposes discrimination and advocates for allyship, stating: "As a Be Equal Ally, I endeavor to expand, enable and ensure equality for everyone" [9]. Resources for this organization include ways to be more inclusive in one's everyday life; how to use inclusive language, including guidelines and examples; the key to unlocking power

---

[8] https://www.101mobility.com/blog/2016/march/top-6-companies-that-hire-people-with-disabiliti/#:~:text=1.,hiring%2Fretaining%20workers%20with%20disabilities.
[9] https://www.ibm.com/impact/be-equal/be-active/

and diversity, how to be an inclusive leader, and using your everyday privilege to help others. IBM Corporation also provides links to communities on their website (e.g., DiversAbility) that focus on accessibility being a culture and a mindset[10]. IBM Corporation's advocacy and DEI initiatives are strong examples of inclusion and accessibility and can be utilized as an example by other companies to create and promote strong DEI/DEIA initiatives themselves.

Procter & Gamble (P&G) is another example of a company who focuses on inclusion and diversity, with the goal of creating an inclusive society for all gender identities, disabilities, race/ethnicities, and any other diverse background of their employees. According to their website, they "are committed to honoring the individuality and unique contributions of our people and ensuring that every single employee shows up to work as their whole, authentic self"[11]. Further, P&G has partnered with Gallaudet University and Rochester Institute of Technology to create a pipeline inclusive of Deaf employee candidates. Additionally, employees with personal experience regarding neurodiversity help recruit neurodiverse individuals. To improve the success of its hiring initiative, P&G collaborated with two nonprofit entities: Specialisterne and Easterseals Serving Greater Cincinnati. They believe that by expanding neurodiversity at its corporate headquarters in Cincinnati, they can drive innovation by hiring individuals that bring in new approaches and fresh perspectives to solving problems[12]. Programs related to this have been launched at the company's UK, Boston, Costa Rica, and Cincinnati offices to further explore how the company can hire neurodiverse individuals and utilize its unique problem-solving skills. Procter & Gamble also shows its support of DEI and disability inclusion with employment accommodations for all employees' abilities, utilizing physical and digital inclusion and accessibility in the workplace with Universal Design implementation. Another focus is to include consumers and employees with disabilities in the design of their products, packaging, and advertising.

Another strong example of the use of DEI in the workforce is at Ernst & Young, whose focus is on making positive, impactful changes in the world. In the 1800s, one of the cofounder's, Arthur Young, was a young man with a disability himself, and was told that after obtaining a law degree, the hearing loss and low vision he acquired would hinder him from successfully serving as an attorney. Instead, Mr. Young decided to move to the United States and pursue his dream of becoming an accountant. Today, his company now uses their platform to strengthen the foundation laid by one of their founders. Identifying a strategic approach to pursuing DEI goals is a focus for this company to avoid discrimination and ensure success and diversity for their employees. Ideas include expanding leadership diversity, creating, and maintaining a culture of empathy and belonging, having a people-focused mindset, and accelerating social impact[13].

The American multinational technology company, Cisco Systems, offers alternative career tracks and telecommuting opportunities to employees, which

[10] https://www.ibm.com/impact/be-equal/communities/diversability/?mhsrc=ibmsearch_a&mhq=DiversAbility
[11] https://us.pg.com/people-with-disabilities/
[12] https://us.pg.com/blogs/inclusive-from-day-one/
[13] https://www.ey.com/en_us/diversity-inclusiveness/ey-us-2022-dei-report#dei-goals

often provide necessary employment accommodations. They are a company that sees inclusion and diversity as a way to strengthen connections and use bold strategies to recruit and maintain diverse talent. Not only does Cisco Systems firmly believe in hiring a diverse population, but they also focus on fostering an environment that cultivates inclusion, collaboration, and respectful culture[14]. Cisco also holds their suppliers to the utmost standards with the key to success being built on a culture of inclusion and integrity for both employees and suppliers.

S.C. Johnson has been a leading company for diversity and inclusion, launching their first formal and inclusive initiative in the early 90s. They have also created an Abilities First Council that advocates for their employees with disabilities. Additionally, S.C. Johnson has programs that recruit, hire, and train individuals with disabilities[15]. And finally, Sodexo, a multinational food service and facilities management corporation created the SOAR (Sodexo Organization of DisAbilities Resources) program that provides disability awareness training and focuses on hiring and retaining employees with disabilities. One of the many key foci at Sodexo is the numerous programs such as their mentoring program, which aims to build relationships and develop competencies in the workforce.

DEI/DEIA Resources

Not only are there DEI/DEIA initiatives within organizations, but there are also programs designed to assist with identifying appropriate resources for companies. The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) is one of those such resources. Created by the U.S. Department of Labor, EARN helps employers find the resources they need to recruit, hire, retain, and advance people with disabilities. Resources include (but are not limited to) state and federal government agencies, education on why workplace disability inclusion matters, mental health resources, and an outline of effective strategies for disability employment in small businesses, to name a few[16]. EARN also provides featured resources on their website with tools such as neurodiversity resources and mental health toolkits that focus on creating a mental-health friendly workplace.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are another resource that focus on DEI/DEIA initiatives. ERGs were created to support underrepresented employees in the workplace and are meant to provide a safe, supportive space for employees who share a common identity. There are many positive aspects that come from ERGs, including fostering an inclusive workplace (a feeling of belonging and acceptance), enhancing employee experiences (members at ERGs have more resources available to them than non-members), promoting cultural awareness (encourages employees to learn more about other cultures), and improving company innovation (cultural innovation only occurs when employees feel psychologically safe and supported)[17].

---

[14] https://www.cisco.com/
[15] https://www.scjohnson.com/en/newsroom/fact-sheets/sc-johnson-diversity-and-inclusion
[16] https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/resources/earn
[17] https://www.betterup.com/blog/employee-resource-group

Mentorship programs are another tool utilized to promote diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. Mentorship programs can help establish meaningful connections and create an environment that promotes learning and professional development for everyone. These programs are designed as a safe space for individuals to express their concerns and for all employees to learn how to grow[18]. There are various types of mentoring that can be utilized to increase and support DEI/DEIA initiatives in the workplace. Deciding which type of mentoring to use in an organization depends on the overall objectives for DEI/DEIA within the company. Reverse mentoring (i.e., partnering older, more experienced employees with younger, less experienced employees) is an opportunity for younger employees to provide more senior employees information on the latest business technologies, input on the success (or lack thereof) of inclusion in the organization, as well as insight into their experiences within the company. Mentoring circles is another example of support in the workplace. This peer-to-peer format enables employees to find co-workers who have different backgrounds than themselves and provides an opportunity for employees to share experiences with the group to (hopefully) gain a better understanding of interactions within the organization.

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace have progressed greatly in the last few decades and continue to expand and become a priority in workplace settings. Fostering an environment that promotes unique thinking and different backgrounds can truly make a difference when it comes to employee satisfaction and retention (among many other benefits). Companies focusing on increasing diversity and creating resources to support employees have identified tools such as employee resource groups, implementation of fair and equitable recruitment, and the importance in holding leadership accountable for the success and future development of all DEI/DEIA initiatives. Although many companies such as Procter & Gamble and S.C. Johnson are at the forefront of change and embracing differences, there are still many companies that can benefit from DEI/DEIA resources to become more culturally aware in their work environment and prevent discrimination in hiring. Through time and effort, the hope is for all companies to fully embrace and support DEI/DEIA initiatives in the workplace.

Acknowledgement

---

[18] https://factorialhr.com/blog/dei-initiatives/